

***Proyecto Conociendonos***  
**(“Getting To Know Us”)**

Assessing the HIV Prevention and Counseling/Testing Needs  
of the Latino Population in King County

## **Executive Summary**

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### **Background**

Latinos in King County are disproportionately impacted by HIV disease. As of December 31, 2003 5,444 persons were reported living with HIV/AIDS in Seattle-King County. While Latinos make up 5.5% of the King County population, they comprised 8.4% of people living with HIV/AIDS. Over time, an increasing share of all HIV/AIDS cases in King County are among Latinos, especially those born outside of the United States.

Given the increasing impact of HIV/AIDS on the Latino community, the Seattle HIV/AIDS Planning Council set aside funds to conduct a needs assessment to find out more about their HIV prevention needs. The assessment project, named *Proyecto Conociendonos* (Getting to Know Us), focused on three priority sub-populations: men who have sex with men (MSM), injection drug users (IDUs), and immigrants.

*Proyecto Conociendonos* employed a team of six field investigators and a field team coordinator to conduct in-depth interviews, brief interviews, and focus groups with members of the priority population, service providers, and community leaders. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in Spanish. Most data collection activities took place in the South End, Capitol Hill, South Park, the Eastside, Beacon Hill, Downtown, and the Central District. The project conducted 183 brief interviews, 96 in-depth interviews, and seven focus groups. A ten-member Community Working Group (CWG) acted as an advisory board to the project.

### **Findings**

Respondents had generally high levels of knowledge about the transmission of HIV. They identified unprotected anal and vaginal sex and injection drug use as the primary modes of transmission. Community members indicated that they would like more specific information about HIV in order to make better decisions about their personal risk behaviors.

When asked about the factors that contribute to the spread of HIV in the community, participants identified five main issues: the lack of information in Spanish, the fear and stigma associated with HIV and same sex behaviors, the lack of a norm around condom use, risks associated with alcohol use, and the effect of racism and discrimination on self-esteem.

When discussing access to HIV counseling and testing, participants discussed the lack of providers who speak Spanish and are familiar with Latino cultures. However, because of confidentiality concerns, participants were hesitant to seek testing from Latino providers. Of the sub-groups interviewed, recent immigrants were least likely to know where to go for counseling and testing.

Gay-identified men were well informed relative to other sub-populations. They actively sought out information about HIV and available services. They were also more able to name agencies that provide prevention education services and testing locations. While the field team was able to talk with non-gay-identified men who have sex with men, these participants were unwilling to discuss MSM behavior “on the record”. The field team described a strong gender divide in the perception of infidelity. Men understood that men may be having sex with other men, while women assumed infidelity meant men having sex with women outside of their relationship. The cultural prohibition against homosexuality is so strong that these men will likely never identify as gay or bisexual.

Recent immigrants discussed at length the impact of their dislocation from family. They focused on the lack of available social activities that do not involve alcohol and sex. Some undocumented immigrants preferred not to know HIV status because of concerns about receiving treatment and further marginalization.

Injection drug users were a very difficult to reach population. While the field team had good connections with this group, IDUs did not trust that the information collected could be kept confidential. Most data were collected through a focus group and these participants discussed sexual risk taking in context of exchanging sex for money or drugs. Those who were connected with the needle exchange were more likely to report having been tested for HIV than IDUs who did not use the exchange.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, this assessment yielded three recommendations for future HIV prevention programs:

- **Counseling and testing:** Rates of infection are increasing faster among foreign-born Latinos than among those born in the U.S. In addition, this sub-population was the least likely to be able to identify locations for accessing counseling and testing, therefore they require the most effort to reach. *Therefore, outreach for HIV C/T should focus on recent immigrants. For all at-risk Latinos, providing counseling and testing services in Spanish is of critical importance.* Testing should emphasize confidentiality and at the same time be culturally appropriate. Respondents were comfortable with having testing in a neutral location, managed by non-Latino providers but with translation services available.
- **Media campaigns in Spanish:** Not surprisingly, providers and community experts emphasized that *HIV education efforts should be culturally appropriate and offered in Spanish.* Both called for mass media campaigns, especially campaigns placed on Spanish radio and television programs, as funding allows. Campaign messages should include more than just exhortations to use condoms. Many respondents, community experts and providers alike, felt the campaigns should expose the hard realities of HIV.
- **Messages targeted to the general population:** Due to the stigma related to talking about HIV and sexuality within the Latino community, respondents recommended that HIV prevention information should be offered within non-HIV contexts. In other words, *providers should weave HIV education into events and services that are not directly related to HIV.* This includes providing information during festivals, Latino events,

sports activities, and linking information with other services provided to Latinos. Additionally, many felt that most non-gay-identified men who have sex with men will never identify as gay and therefore will not access services that are targeted to the gay population. Providing general HIV messages to the entire community may be the only way to reach this population.

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